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ABSTRACT

A three-phased writing assignment in Freshman Composition helps students move from writing narration and description to producing writing which supports and argues a point. In the first phase, the students are asked to write a paper which clearly states a point. In the second phase, students alter their first paper to conform to the needs of a different audience. In the third phase, students become a member of their audience and compose a convincing counterargument. The result of this experience is that students' papers show progress from the first to the third phase and that the writing is more coherent than when argumentation was addressed with a less structured approach. (RS)

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Rationale and Introduction

At Northern Essex Community College, among the English Composition I requirements is addressing the skills needed for informative and persuasive writing. In working with any writing modes, I've seldom received successful results using pre-assigned topics. I've learned that the best writing is produced when the students care about or have a vested interest in the subject they're addressing. But even when I've given a free choice of topics, the informative or persuasive writing I have received has often been very disappointing. It became apparent to me that when trying to write about general or philosophical problems, my students' own voices, the voices they used in earlier writing-from-personal-experience assignments, were abandoned in favor of what Ken Macrorie would call "Engfish," a language that is convoluted, contorted, and practically incomprehensible. After much reading and experimentation and many conferences and discussions with my colleagues, I was able to understand that expecting my students to progress seamlessly from writing narration and description to producing writing which supports and argues a point was unrealistic. The skills required for analytical writing are complex and do not necessarily simply evolve after success with other writing modes. I theorized that the writing skills needed to express an argument had to be broken down and mastered in smaller segments before I

could expect a concise statement of a point, let alone a well-developed philosophical treatise. By combining and refining many ideas and suggestions from peers, and synthesizing writing ideas found in texts and professional journals, I have developed a three-part assignment which asks students to first express and support a point, then tailor that material for a different audience, and finally express, support, and argue the counterpoint. While this undertaking may sound overwhelming when seen as one chunk, the three-staged approach make the exercise very workable. The writing phases are systematic and sequential and each part must be completed before the next stage is attempted. The exercise requires about three weeks of class time and generates three pieces of writing.

Phase I- Stating a Point

Because I've experienced the fruitlessness of asking students to produce writing which supports or refutes a general point of my choosing, I ask instead that they work with a problem of concern to them. I learned, too, that just saying "Write about a problem of importance to you" produced blank stares and blank papers. Before writers can work with expressing their problems, they need to be able to identify their problems both to themselves and to their audience. Therefore, this exercise really begins one week before the assignment is discussed. My students are required to write a page every day during the semester, "dailies," and I assign areas to work with each week, such as describing incidents or recalling childhood experiences, which dovetail with

upcoming writing assignments. Therefore, one week before I intend to start this assignment, I ask students to explain a school-related problem in their dailies, a new one each day. When I introduce this assignment, the students already have a backlog of seven problems from which to choose-a starting point if they so desire. Additionally, I ask students to read their textbook chapters on explaining and supporting a point. (I use Hacker and Renshaw's Writing With A Voice, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985.)

Session 1 - Introducing Assignment A

After we discuss the material in the textbook dealing with the elements of thesis-supported writing, we identify and evaluate these points in sample papers. I then distribute Assignment A.

Assignment A - Stating A Point

> You come to school here at Northern Essex nearly every day. You must be familiar with the ins and outs, the things that are going right as well as the things that are going wrong. Select a school-related problem which you are experiencing or one which you can see exists and with which you would like to get more involved. Assuming the writing you're about to compose would be submitted to the school newspaper, develop an explanation of a problem- as you see it - and provide a possible solution, if you can.

In the initial part of this assignment, my goal is to have

students clearly express a point. For the time being, in order to minimize the difficulty and confusion writers often experience when trying to juggle or superimpose the concepts of purpose and audience while still in the process of discovering an argument, I suggest both. By focusing the topic on school-related problems, I can be reasonably sure students will work from an experiential rather than a hypothetical level. Students generally have a much easier time when they write about what they know about. Additionally, using school-related problems lets me build in an informed audience, (peers), for group reviews of the writing. Secondly, by suggesting students consider the school newspaper as the forum for their arguments, I have indirectly supplied a feel for an appropriate tone and degree of formality for the writing. Providing these controls eliminates some of the pre-writing issues writers must deal with, issues which tended to distract my inexperienced writers from simply concentrating on and expressing their points, and issues which I concluded may have been contributing to the strained language referred to earlier.

After we read through the assignment and any questions are answered, we begin an in-class exercise. I ask everyone to write an explanation of a problem using only one or two sentences. Although I do not use the term "thesis statement," this is pretty much what I'm suggesting: a bare-boned, no-pussy-footing-around statement of a problem. I feel this initial clarity is as necessary for the writer as it is for the reader because it forces the writer to crystallize the problem which in turn points the writer

toward material needed for direct support. Until the writer has discovered and is able to express just what the problem is, to perhaps create a bull's-eye, attempts to support that point can not help but be off-target.

After several minutes of refining and revising, we share our sentences, out loud, one at a time, and nod yes or no if we feel we understand the problem from the statement given. We revise until both writer and audience are satisfied. We also discuss what material could be used to explain this point.

I tie this pre-writing exercise in with Assignment A by telling the class that in our next meeting, when the first good draft is due, our group review will focus primarily on the first paragraph to see if the problem is clearly stated. I advise them that unless that part of the writing works, it is unlikely the rest of it will, although we will read the whole piece to see how the support does develop and whether that information can help us to offer suggestions to the writer. I also remind them not to try to compose in a linear fashion, (a concept previously discussed in class), that it is fine to start anywhere and keep writing until the point is clarified in the writer's mind. Then, concern with the initial paragraph can be a goal for revision. Without this admonition, I find students often get bogged down in trying to compose the perfect, chiseled-in-granite opening paragraph and seldom get farther in their first draft attempts. With the writing task specifically defined in this manner, I have received a much clearer set of first drafts than when my assignment-making was more nebulous.

Session 2 - Group Review of Assignment A

The group review of Assignment A is also a directed exercise. I have found that although my students were well-intentioned, in the early phases of Composition I, most were too inexperienced or insecure about their own writing to offer helpful commentary to their peers. They did not know "what to look for" and feared both giving and receiving criticism. Their comments were usually of the "That's good, I liked it" variety. To become more informed critics, at the start of the semester we establish criteria we feel good writing must meet, and the order of its importance. Content, purpose and audience are foremost; mechanics receive a final, editing-type concern. With this background, and with the hand-out sheets I provide for group review of Assignment A, the drafts receive a thorough going-over.

Assignment A - Reader Response Sheet

Author _____ Reader _____

Answer the questions below, being as specific as possible.

1. Read the first paragraph and then pause. Paraphrase the problem you expect will be developed in this paper.

2. Now finish reading the paper. Were your expectations for the paper's direction fulfilled? If not, what do you now find to be the problem being discussed?

3. Identify a particular strength in this paper.

4. Provide a suggestion for improvement.

I ask the students to share their papers with as many classmates as possible, emphasizing that the more feedback they receive, the easier revision is likely to be. I also stress the need for specific written commentary. When students previously worked with only oral feedback, they told me that by the time they got back to revising their drafts, most of the positive feedback and suggestions for improvement were forgotten. Because the written commentary sheets do generate concrete responses, these recommendations and criticisms can be mulled over carefully when the writers begin to revise. The reader response sheet also reveals the reader's identity, allowing the writer to discuss the paper further and seek clarification, if needed. Students tell me that they find being armed with many suggestions to be very helpful in the revision process.

The in-class group review procedure is usually enlightening. As students read each other's papers, the need for clarity is illustrated and reinforced, and writers get to see whether or not their writing is producing their desired effect. This procedure also generates enthusiasm and the positive feelings established in this part of the assignment not only build rapport and confidence, but promote a cooperative atmosphere for group review of Assignment B. A polished version of Assignment A is due a week later, and the textbook chapters on audience and purpose are assigned.

Phase 2 - Changing the Audience

Session 3 - Introducing Assignment B

On the day the revised version of Assignment A is due, students naturally expect me to collect the writing immediately. I do not. Instead, we discuss the chapters on purpose and audience and try to identify the intended audience for several writing samples. We discuss assumptions the writer has made about reader knowledge as well as writer's purpose and tone. We then try to evaluate the success of each piece of writing: does it make a point to a reader and how is this accomplished? What is the writer's attitude toward the subject and audience as revealed by the tone? Examining purpose, audience and tone sets up the second part of this assignment.

Now that the students have succeeded at expressing a problem and some have provided solutions, I want to eliminate some of the controls imposed in Assignment A. I want the students to grapple this time with the influence purpose, audience and stance or tone exert on a piece of writing. Assignment B asks the writers to do just that.

Assignment B - Changing the Audience

You completed Assignment A with one particular audience in mind. For next class, recast Assignment A, but this time select a totally different audience toward whom to gear your writing.

Be prepared to discuss in class what difficulties this assignment posed and/or what enlightenments it provided.

After reading through this explanation, I ask each student to identify their Assignment A audience, (usually a peer audience though sometimes administrators), and ask for whom Assignment B could also be written. I ask, too, what that audience's attitude and knowledge about the subject is likely to be and what the writer's attitude toward that audience will be. No one begins Assignment B until each of these questions has been answered aloud. Because many classmates are already familiar with Assignment A topics from their group reviews, they too can offer suggestions for audience change. I also ask students to keep track of what specific changes were made to Assignment A to produce Assignment B to reinforce the idea that considerations for purpose, audience and tone can significantly change a piece of writing. I tell the students to keep Assignment A and use it as their springboard for Assignment B. I try to make it clear that Assignment A does not become Assignment B; Assignment A remains constant and for Assignment B, a new piece of writing is produced. I also emphasize that in our next group review, purpose, audience and tone will be examined. A good working draft of Assignment B is due for the next class meeting.

Session 4 - Group Review of Assignment B

When we next meet, I once again provide a hand-out to direct the peer readings.

Assignment B - Reader Response Sheet

Author _____ _____ Reader _____

Answer the questions below, being as specific as possible.

1. Read the first paragraph and then pause. Write down what you expect the purpose, audience

and tone of this paper to be.

Purpose:

Audience:

Tone:

2. Now finish reading the paper. Were your expectations for the paper's purpose, audience and tone fulfilled? If not, what do you now find the purpose, audience and tone to be?

Purpose:

Audience:

Tone:

3. Identify a particular strength in this paper.

4. Provide a suggestion for improvement.

The students again collect as many response sheets as possible and this time there is usually increased enthusiasm: they remember the guidance received on Assignment A and are anxious for more feedback. Coincidentally, the commentary on Assignment B is usually more helpful as students learn what type comments provide the most direction. When the students read their response sheets, they again are able to judge the success of the piece of writing. They really do welcome the wide range of reactions and know the final decisions for revision are their own. In both group review sessions, I, too, serve as a reader and fill out response sheets.

A polished copy of Assignment B is due a week later, along with the already-revised Assignment A, and reading the textbook chapter on arguing a point is assigned.

Phase 3 - The Opposition's Response

Session B - Introducing Assignment C

The students report to class ready to submit Assignments A and B, but again, I hold off on collecting the writing. We begin class with a discussion of the chapter on arguing a point, working through some of the exercises on logical reasoning and fallacies, and provide hypothetical arguments to support suggested statements. These exercises usually generate questions about rules of thumb as to how much consideration should be given in writing to the opposition's point of view: Should it be left out entirely? Should the opposition's argument be stated and then refuted? Should an argumentative paper take an offensive or defensive tack? As the students ask these questions, half-knowing that I cannot provide a set of all-encompassing answers, I can see they are sorting through the questions with which every writer must come to terms. They are standing back from their limited focus in Assignment A and beginning to see the possibilities for how their material can be shaped, how they can and must control and manipulate their ideas depending upon their purpose and audience.

At this stage of the three-part exercise, I want students to work with argumentation, with considering the objections their identification of a problem and suggested solution might have on their intended audiences. Assignment C asks students to adopt a different personna - to become their own devil's advocate.

Assignment C - Counterpoint

You've had a chance to explain your ideas to two separate audiences. You must be extremely familiar with your topic by now. Does a writer's closeness to a topic result in a sort of blindness? Has your reasoning been sound? Is your point valid?

Become a member of either of the two audiences you addressed. Compose a response to your essay from the other side's point-of-view.

Be prepared to discuss in class any particular problems this assignment posed, whether this assignment was more or less difficult than the previous two, and why.

In discussing Assignment C, students usually say it would be very hard to compose a convincing opposing argument because in Assignments A and B they've already clearly shown the validity of their points. I ask them to think about each argument they offered. In each instance, they heard a voice raising an objection, and their argument was intended to respond to that opposition. We decide that what is needed to complete Assignment C is the verbalization of those implied arguments as well as the relevant support for those opinions. I warn students not to take the stand that the opposition is obviously not well-informed and would therefore compose a ridiculous counterpoint. I ask them what they can do to make Assignment C as strong as Assignments A and B. It is usually conceded that the only way a credible

counter argument can be constructed is by doing some field work or research. The students are usually reluctant to admit this point, dreading the extra work involved. But too, they realize that to inform or to compose valid arguments, the facts must be accurately presented. I encourage them to speak with people who would disagree with their stance and try to understand their rationales. This part of the assignment has the side benefit of gently acquainting the students with research ... the next mode of writing to be covered in the course.

Students are told to hold on to Assignments A and B and have a well-polished copy of Assignment C ready for discussion in conference with me a week or so later. We do not use group reviews on Assignment C as this time I want the writers to address all the struggles inherent in composing an argumentative paper without benefit of hand-holding. I also ask them to be prepared to explain to me the changes they made in going from Assignment A to Assignment B, the problems Assignment C posed, and how they resolved them. Additionally, I request they think about which assignment gave them the most difficulty and why.

Session 6+ - Conferences on Assignments A, B, and C

When we meet for conferences on Assignments A, B, and C, I read Assignments A and B quickly. At this point I am already reasonably familiar with these papers. I look more closely at Assignment C, trying to see whether the concepts we've been working with have come together. I reserve my commentary until I've elicited the students' reactions to their writing, asking them the aforementioned questions and getting a reading from them

as to where they feel their strengths and weaknesses lie. Although these conferences are time-consuming and may take two to three class sessions, it is rewarding. I can see my students become objective about their writing and have concrete and well-founded analyses of what is and is not working in each paper. They have been weaned from my initial guidance and assume responsibility for and control of their own writing. Although by this time they've somewhat exhausted their enthusiasm for writing about this problem, I offer them the opportunity to go through one more revision, or to leave the writing where it is, thus exposing them to another dilemma each writer faces: deciding when to stop revising.

I find it interesting that the students usually feel their counterpoint paper is their best. When they take the time to uncover the reasons for opposition or counter arguments to their points of view, they learn a valuable lesson about being well-informed. It is not infrequent that they concede they were wrong in the initial assumptions made in Assignments A and B. Similarly, the writers identify the counterpoint as being their weakest paper when they have not faithfully sought out their opponent's support. Even this recognition is welcome as it does at least show an awareness for what is needed to produce a convincing position paper.

I cannot say this exercise guarantees masterpieces. Nor can I say the light dawns in each student's head and that each writer is now forever able to compose a strong argumentative paper. But I can say in general that the writing I see shows progress from Assignment A to B to C, and that the writing is more coherent than when I try to address argumentation with a less structured

approach. I know that with this method, the students have been given the opportunity to isolate some of the skills needed for informative and persuasive writing and incorporate them in their writing. I cannot say that success achieved in this three-part exercise automatically transfers to any further argumentative writing, but I do know students tell me they feel more confident about their knowledge of how to approach writing to explain and support a point.

Conclusion

I have to concede that although the Composition I course outline calls for students to have mastered the writing modes discussed here about two-thirds of the way through the semester, not every student is that far along. Indeed many students require much more than one semester to accomplish the aims of Composition I. I have learned to accept that just because I'm ready or the syllabus is ready for argumentative writing, the students are not necessarily ready. But proceed I must. Working with purpose, audience, stating and arguing a point as described in this exercise has reduced both my and my students' frustration level somewhat as the final products have been far superior to those I received before trying this approach.

In using this approach, at worst, I see my students grappling with problems each writer faces, being able to identify some of these problems, and recognizing that these stumbling blocks are universal and inherent to the writing process - not individual weaknesses. At best, both writer and I feel rewarded when I receive one, two, or even three well-thought-out pieces of writing, one of which, not infrequently, is submitted to the school newspaper-- and published.